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Advice to the Language Learner.

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This essay is addressed to the language student rather than the teacher. Second language learning and its component skills are explained briefly. Techniques of imitation, analogy, analysis, practice, and memorization are described, and speaking, reading, and writing skills are discussed. Suggestions are made for improving reading ability in foreign languages. (DS)

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(The following article is of interest to teachers and pupils alike.)

The Hawaii Language Teacher; vol.8, no.1 December 1966.

ADVICE TO THE LANGUAGE LEARNER*

About 3500 languages are spoken in the world today, and more than 140 of them have over a million speakers each. Since the United States is involved in some way with almost every other country, members of your generation will need to learn all the major languages and even some of the minor ones. The trouble is that no one can predict today which of these many languages you will need to know ten or twenty years from now. Maybe some day you will have to learn a language that you have not even heard of yet. Your present foreign-language course therefore serves a double purpose, teaching you the language you are now studying and also teaching you techniques of foreign-language study so that you can apply them to later study of other languages.

Learning your own language. All over the world children learn to understand and speak their own language before they go to school. They acquire this wonderful skill by constant practice, by listening and talking all the time to themselves, to their family and friends. At first the child only repeats words and phrases that he has heard and learned. But, he finds that he has to put new sentences together to get what he wants. He tries the new sentences out on people. They accept some of his sentences but reject others because they are funny or because they don't make sense. The child keeps on trying until he works out a system for producing acceptable, understandable sentences. He assembles in his mind a simple model of the language, his own grammar of his language.

Languages are different. The new language you are learning will be easier if you do not expect it to behave like English. It will have different sounds, and its words will have different kinds of meaning fitted together in un-English ways. Even though every living language has been learned by every child who speaks it, you will not find it child's play to learn this new language. Learning it will require a lot of hard work, but any intelligent student can accomplish it, especially with a good teacher and a good textbook.

Language and writing. In all languages writing has always followed speech, often by many thousands of years. Most of the languages of the world have not yet been put into written form by their speakers. Most writing systems are just ways of putting on paper what someone has said, either aloud or to himself. For example, all the written languages of Western Europe use the Roman alphabet, but each one uses these letters to represent its own sounds. When you study the written form of any of these languages you will have to learn to overcome the interference from English, which will tempt you to pronounce letters in another language as they are pronounced in English. They almost never are.

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*This statement grew out of a conference on the application of linguistics to language learning held at the offices of the Modern Language Association in 1964. It was printed in tentative form in the 1965 Directory issue of PMLA. It was then revised in the light of comments from many teachers and linguists. - Donald D. Walsh

Learning a foreign language. Learning a foreign language is not something that you just think and talk about, like rules and theories. It is something that you do, a physical activity, a little like learning to play the piano or the violin, except that it is easier. Learning any skill requires a great deal of practice. And since using a language means using sounds, you must do much of your practicing aloud. Learning a language means learning a whole new pattern of habits. You must work hard to prevent your English habits from getting in your way. Many of your English language habits will be bad habits for your new language.

There are three techniques in language learning: imitation, analogy, and analysis. You must use them all.

Learning by imitation. In learning a language you must practice imitating a model who is speaking at normal speed. You need also to hear a variety of voices, on records and tapes. Watch you teacher carefully, listen carefully to your teacher and the other models, and practice imitating them aloud. Concentrate first on the spoken form of sentences and conversations, not on the written forms that you will find printed in your book. Repeat what you hear as closely as you can, so that your pronunciation will improve with practice. Listen to the pitch levels of each phrase. Don't learn words singly but learn phrases.

Learning by analogy. A significant moment in a child's learning his own language is the first time he says something like "Mary goed home." This mistake is a creative mistake, for it shows that the child is beginning to understand how language works. By thinking of "sew, sewed" or "show, showed." which he learned through imitation, he has created by analogy a new pair, "go, goed," that he had probably never heard, and in so doing he has shown that he can learn by analogy, even though this attempt is not a complete success. Until you can make and understand new utterances, building upon patterns learned earlier by imitation, your knowledge of the language is even more limited than the child's when he says? "Mary goed home." Learning how to create by analogy is the purpose of pattern drills and other exercises. Each of these drills begins with a model phrase and asks you to produce new phrases by analogy from the model. A child has to grope his way toward language control through many trial-and-error analogies, but a student using a good textbook will have step-by-step practice arranged to keep his errors to a minimum.

Learning by analysis. Young children learn sounds more accurately and with more enthusiasm than their elders. As you grow older you begin to lose this capacity for easy imitation. But to make up for this loss, you have the advantage of being able to reason: you can analyze language. You can see how your new language is put together, how it works, how it differs from English. Information of this sort, given in grammatical explanations or rules, can help you to learn the language faster. But language analysis (learning about the language) is not the same as learning to use the language. Explanations are only an aid to learning: they are not the language itself, just as knowing the rules of the road does not make you automatically a good driver. That takes practice.

The need for practice. Unless you are learning your new language in a country where everyone speaks it, you can not hope to get as many opportunities to practice speaking it as you got when you were learning English. So you will learn more rapidly if you make your opportunities for practice intensive and enthusiastic. You will find many conversations and drills in your textbook. Practice them as intensely as you can, in class and out. Whenever someone else is reciting, practice silently right along with him. When you do your homeowrk, practice out loud. Practice with tapes

and records. Repeat after them, and speak up just as if you were talking all the way across a big room. And practice your newly learned phrases on your fellow students.

Memorizing. You will have to learn a great many patterns and phrases as you study a language. Don't be afraid of stretching your memory. The more you use it the better it gets. You can involve almost all your senses as you learn a language, by using your ears, mouth, eyes, fingers. Use your imagination. Pretend that you are an actor whose lines you are learning. Break up your memorizing sessions into several intense, short periods (15-20 minutes) instead of a single long stretch of time. Be sure to practice out loud when you memorize. And of course make sure that you know the meaning of each phrase that you learn, so that you can combine and vary phrases to express what you want to say.

Reading and writing. You can learn the difficult skills of reading and writing more easily if you have first learned to speak the language. You must practice speaking it right from the start and continue to practice speaking throughout all your study of the language. Even if you are not interested in the spoken language, you can not learn to read it without using some kind of pronunciation, even if it is only a silent one that you invent. So it makes sense to learn the normal pronunciation. Reading foreign articles and books for information and enjoyment is one of the principal reasons for studying a foreign language; your enjoyment will increase if you know what the language sounds like to the writers and readers of its literature.

Writing systems. Writing systems are incomplete because they seldom indicate rhythm, pitch, or stress. They often seem senseless -- even in English -- because there may be no apparent reason why any letter or combination of letters represents a sound. Consider, for example, the various spellings of a single English sound: see, key, she, receive, believe, tea, or the various sounds represented by the letters ea in meat, create, great, heart, Seattle. Speech and writing, though related, are different systems. Speech came first in the development of language, comes first for every native learner, and it should come first for you, too.

How to read in a foreign language. At first, you should read only what you have practiced saying, and you should read it aloud. When you begin to read silently and you come to words and phrases that are new to you, use the following techniques: 1) Read the passage through for general sense first, without stopping to puzzle over unfamiliar words or constructions. Then go back for a second, more careful reading. When you come to an unknown word, read on at least to the next punctuation mark before you look it up. Try to get the meaning from the sentence without having to look for it in the vocabulary. 2) When you decide that you must look up a word, a) underline the word with your pencil, b) take a good look at the phrase that contains it, and pronounce the phrase aloud, c) repeat the phrase over and over, aloud if possible, concentrating all your attention on its sound and spelling while you are looking for the keyword in the vocabulary, d) when you find it put a dot before the word in its column, e) turn back to your page, find the last underlined word, and go on reading. Never write the English translation on the page. Doing so puts the emphasis on the English equivalent and not on the foreign word which is the word that you must learn. When you finish your assignment, reread it and see how many of the phrases containing underlined words you still understand. Look up the words you have not yet learned and put another dot in front of them in the vocabulary. Look through the vocabulary once a week and make a special effort to learn the words with several dots. These are your "hard" words. Learn them now or you will be spending hours looking them up month after month, year after year. And go back

over your reading material to check your understanding of the sentences that you have underlined words or phrases.

Prepare for the future. We said earlier that you have no sure way of knowing now which foreign languages will eventually be of most value to you. But if you learn one foreign language well in school, the skills that you acquire will be helpful in learning your next foreign language, whenever and wherever you learn it. You may then have to work with inadequate materials or with no materials at all and with a model who has had little or no training as a teacher. But if, in learning your first foreign language, you have also learned how to study languages in general, you will be able to apply this skill to the study of any other language at any time or place.

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